

DEVELOPMENT OF HERALDRY IN MEDIEVAL SERBIA*

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Heraldic tradition of the Serbian Medieval State, although more modest than in more heraldically developed parts of Europe, still has rather interesting development, packed with various influences, but also with certain characteristics typical for it alone, due to geopolitical position of Serbia between the East and the West. Such symbolic and heraldic influences have shaped an unique heraldic tradition which was largely stopped in it's growth and flourishing with the Ottoman conquest.

If, for the purposes of this paper, we can estimate that the proper and developed heraldry begins roughly in the second quarter of the XII century, then we can draw a conclusion that in that sense, Serbia wasn't left so much behind comparing to the rest of the Europe. At least not as near as much as one might expect, or as it is commonly regarded.

Namely, many researchers of the Serbian heraldic antiquity have considered that we can speak about the Serbian heraldry only from the time of the reign of Emperor Stefan Urosh IV Dushan The Mighty (1331-1355), but it is our opinion that such claims should be disputed, and even qualified as unfounded.

It is undisputed that Serbian Medieval heraldry has been developing in two main directions and under rather different influences. Those influences came directly or indirectly from the Byzantine Empire (only when it comes to the repertoire of heraldic charges), but also from the West, especially from German, Hungarian and Italian lands, and also under the influence of the Crusades, which also had their path over the Serbian territory and had to leave significant impact upon the development of Serbian heraldry. Let us remind ourselves that, during the Third Crusade in 1189, Holy Roman Emperor Frederick I Barbarossa (1152-1190) was greeted and met by Grand Zhupan Stefan Nemanja (1113-1199) in the city of Nish. Anyway, besides the said foreign influences (also present in other heraldic traditions and systems in the Europe), we are convinced that in the Serbian case we can also speak of an indigenous and authentic heraldry.

This being said, we wish to direct attention to the richer and better developed source of the genesis of heraldry in the Serbian Medieval State. This direction was precisely the one that has started in the Serbian Littoral, where the factual authority of the pre-Nemanjich Royal Dynasty of Vojislavljevich (1034-1186) has endured the longest. That is, since the final prevail of The Holy Nemanjich Dynasty, which was derived from the Vojislavljevich Dynasty from the Serbian Medieval Kingdom of Zeta and the Dynasty of Vukanovich, the Grand Zhupans of Rashka, alike.

Let us stress that, for example, the city of Kotor in Bocche di Cattaro has found itself within the borders of the Nemanjich Serbia since the end of the XII century. Taking this in to account, it is clear that the complete heraldic tradition of this city and all of the region of Boka Kotorska has to be considered as an integral part of the Serbian Medieval heraldic tradition and heritage, because the heraldry itself exists precisely from this period in time. Also, it has reached it's flourishing peak precisely in XIV century, in the eve of the decline of the Holy Imperial Nemanjich Dynasty and it's State.



It is our belief that there are sufficient reasons for us to place the birth and development of this branch of our Mediaeval heraldry from the region of Boka in a considerably earlier antiquity than mid XIV century, when Emperor Dushan The Mighty has reigned and when his power and authority was extended also over the territory of "our faithful and capital and beloved city of Kotor", as he has called it himself.

Proof of such a claim are indeed circumstantial, but also – inexorable. Let us, for this occasion, only consider the facts and examples found in the remains of a foundation of the wife of the Serbian King Stefan Urosh I (+1. May 1277), Queen Jelena Nemanjich (nee Anjou) (+8. February 1314). That is a Franciscan Monastery from the XIII century, which was founded by her on Gurdich, in the Southern suburb of the old town of Kotor. *(pic.1)*

Until now, the archeological excavations of this location have discovered 137 tombs, out of which there are 37 with coats of arms or other heraldic elements engraved upon the gravestones. *(pic.2)* Coats of Arms found and identified on this locality have belonged to families Drago, Bolitza-Bivolichich, Bizanti, Grubishich etc. The oldest one among them is dated in 1372. All of the other graves found here belong to a period from the said year to 1657, when this Monastery was demolished.

Coats of Arms found there are a reflection of a well developed and rooted heraldic tradition and practice, that has had to have been existing for a considerably longer period than just two decades. Names of the families, to which have belonged those buried there under their hereditary armorial

bearings, are mentioned in historical sources in that region of the Serbian Medieval State in earlier centuries too, and therefore we can safely assume that they have inherited their Coats of Arms from an earlier period of time. Namely, it is known that the formation of the Medieval noble (nobiles) and burgher (populus) class in this region has started among the Roman (pre-Slavic) natives since the early VII century and this process was largely completed by the XI century. It is important to say that during this whole period (during the rule of the Dynasties of Vlastimirovich and Vojislavljevich) there was as parallel process of migration of the Slavic (Serbian) population from the cities hinterland in to the city itself. Because of that, at the beginning of the XII century (when heraldry as we know it has appeared) members of this ethnic group were already within the ranks of the local nobles and citizens of Kotor.

It is equally important to stress that, in those beginnings, all of the free citizens, regardless if they used to belong to the clerical, noble or burgher class, have had the equal right to have and use coats of arms. In a later period this right was commonly attributed to the members of the first two classes, but up until the beginning of XVI century, some of the better known and influential burgher families have continued to use their coats of arms, regardless of the fact that they were never ennobled.

All of the stated above gives testimony of a well developed, well established and rather old heraldic tradition of the region of Boka, within the Serbian Medieval Kingdom and Empire



Let's take as an example, the abovementioned Emperor Dushan (1308-+20. December 1355). We have absolutely no historical evidence that he has ever used a proper coat of arms. It is only natural, if we understand his political agenda and a general nature of the Serbian Medieval State, as a member of the so called Byzantine Commonwealth, and as well the factual absence of heraldic use in The Eastern Roman Empire itself. On the other hand for his nobleman and Protovestiarior, Nikola Bucha from Kotor, we know for a fact that he has used a coat of arms in different versions, which testifies of a developed heraldic tradition and consciousness in the said parts of The Serbian Empire. *(pic.3)* From this example we learn that, in that historical period, Serbian heraldry has already known even for heraldic augmentations, as special heraldic charges, addeed to ones coat of arms by the grace and will of the monarch, and thus marking certain honourable merits of the armiger. Namely, Nikola Bucha was the Emperors envoy at the French Court at one time, and according to some, this is the time when a freur-de-lis has appeared on his coat of arms, supposedly granted to him by the French King Philip VI of Valois The Fortunate, as a sign of recognition in perpetuity. It is our belief that the stonecarved coat of arms of Nikola Bucha from the Lapidarium in Kotor is a very developed and sophisticated heraldic composition which speaks volumes about the level of heraldic culure in this part of Serbian Empire in the first half of the XIV century.

It is interesting that in that period Sebian heraldry already uses allusive coats of arms. With their contence they remind of the name of the armiger. Therefore, for example, the coat of arms of the Drago family uses a dragon, and the various versions of the coats of arms of the family Bolica-Bivolichich use a bull as a main charge. Same is with the arms of a notable and influential family of Zmajevich from Perast, whose main heraldic charge is also a dragon. *(pic.4)* On the grounds of this heraldic tradition Serbian heraldry of Boka Kotorska continued it's growth and development through the coming centuries, constantly receiving weaker or stronger influences of the Venetian, and finally of Austro-hungarian heraldry. It has created a rich heraldic legacy to this day not only in Kotor, but also in Herceg Novi, Perast, Stari Bar, Dubrovnik etc.

It is only natural that this heraldic tradition has influenced the continental regions of the Medieval Serbian State, but it is obvious that there was also a return influence from the mainland to the costal cities of the Medieval Serbia. This is why we recognize the influence of a Serbian mainland heraldic tradition in various coats of arms in Boka Kotorska and Dubrovnik due to migrations that have accompanied those trubulent times, mainly from Hercegovina.

Such a developed heraldic tradition had to have a significant impact on the heraldic development in the rest of Medieval Serbia, since the heraldic legacy and tradition of the majority of other Serbian territories was infinitely less dynamic and established. This, continental, branch of Serbian heraldic tradition had a fairly independent and different development almost until the beginning of the XV century. *(pic.5)*

It is more than a coincidence that this particular branch of the Serbian Medieval heraldic development, which has existed in both of the Serbian (in an ethnic sense of the word) Medieval States – Serbia and Bosnia, had important similarities with certain characteristics of the contemporary Middle European heraldic practices. As we have already said, Stefan Nemanja has established relations with Emperor Frederick Barbarossa, whose knights in The III Crusade have already had a fairly developed and systematized system of heraldic bearings. Therefore, both Stefan Nemanja and his descendants were fully aware of the existence and use of heraldry in the West, and as well within their own State. Regardless of that, the heraldic development of their Dynastic (and therefore State) heraldy, as well of the heraldry of the majority of their aristocracy has taken a rather specific and unique course.

Namely, the characteristic of heraldic symbols (but still not coats of arms in the full sense of the word), that have developed and were widely used in the continental part of the Medieval Serbia, up to the XV century, was that they didn't employ a shield at all. This crucial element of a coat of arms was completely omitted at first, and only a helm with a crest was used in place of a proper coat of arms. In some cases even the helm was heavily diminished or even completely omitted, and only the crest was displayed. Later, those were the symbols employed upon the shields or crests in the arms of certain more notable Serbian Medieval aristocratic families. In this deliberate omission of the principal element of a Coat of Arms we can detect a certain similarity and a hint of the influence of the heraldic tradition of the Central Europe (mainly Hungarian and German), that we have already mentioned. Truth being said, even though the contemporary heraldic tradition of the German lands could emphasize and put an additional accent on the helm with a crest, it has never neglected the fact that there is no real coat of arms without a shield. On the other hand, though, in contemporary Hungarian heraldic practice there were a bit more examples of the use of the helm with a crest alone, like in Serbia. In other European heraldic traditions, though, the helm with a crest was always considered as an integral part, but not as an unavoidable part of an armorial achievement. Furthermore, in some heraldic traditions, like in Italy, it wasn't uncommon to have arms without a crest, or to use standard plume of ostrich feathers in a vast number of arms, like in the Spanish heraldic tradition. On the other hand, in the main part of

the Serbian Medieval States, precisely this element has developed itself as a dominant heraldic composition of the hereditary heraldic insignia and has gradually completely taken over the role of a proper Coat of Arms.



Such use of a helm with a crest instead of a coat of arms was frequent in Serbia, especially from the first half of the XIV century. There are numerous such examples found in preserved numismatic, sfragistic and archeological artefacts from that era, aswell as on contemporary sacral objects, gravestones etc. It's interesting that such heraldic custom has spread through the Medieval Bosnian Kingdom too, regardless of the fact that the proper heraldic practice in those Serbian ethnic territories, under a stronger Western political influence, had a somewhat faster development than it the dominion of The Nemanjich Dynasty (what is today Macedonia, Serbia, Montenegro, Herzegovina etc).

As an example, we direct your attention to a coin of a Bosnian Ban Stjepan II Kotromanich (1314-1353) and King Stefan Urosh Nemanjich The Mighty, before he was crowned an Emperor (1346). They use a completely simillar armorial design – a helm with a crest of a peacock plume attached by a cushion. (*pic.6*)

Interesting is the heraldic device of Grand Duke Nikola Stanjevich from his tombstone in his foundation, Monastery Koncha (before 1371), as it uses a very similar approach and design. *(pic.7)*

The helm of Saint Greatmartyr Grand Prince Stefan Lazar Hrebeljanovich of Kosovo (Prilepatz, 1329 – +Kosovo Field, June 15 1389), engraved in the outer southern wall of the nartex of the Catholicon of The Holy Serbian Imperial Laura Monastery Hilandar (Mount Athos), uses a crest of bulls horns, which was a lasting heraldic symbol of his Dynasty too. It was accompanied by a doubleheaded eagle from the northern wall, and together they have served as a basis for the formation of the proper arms of his heir and son, Saint Despot Stefan Lazarevich The Tall (Krushevatz, 1377 - +Glavitza near Kragujevatz, 19. July 1427). *(pic.8)*

It is known that Despot Stefan The Tall, has used the same device as his father at first, as we can learn from some of his coins and his seal from 1405 *(pic.9)*, but later he has used different design of proper arms. That is also a clear Western influence, giving the fact that The Despot was one of the finest European Knights of his time, and the first Knight of the famous Order of The Dragon, founded by The Holy Roman Emperor Sigismund of Luxemburg in 1408. *(pic.10)* The Serbian nobles and knights of the time (XIV-XV century) have followed, and have used various coats of arms upon their clothes, riding gear and jewelry, as we can observe from the multitude of preserved signet rings with the heraldic representations of a dragon, from Southern Serbia, Bosnia and cities like Prishtina, Dubrovnik etc, which testifies that this was the time of equalizing of the two different Serbian Medieval traditions (coastal and continental) in to an unified heraldic system. *(pic.11)*



On the other hand, the helm of Sevastokrator Branko Mladenovich of Ochrid (last mentioned 1365), the founder of the Brankovich Dynasty (ruled Serbia as Despots 1427- 1459), has used as a crest a demi-lion to the sinister, as we can see from his preserved embroidered belt. *(pic.12)* And just like in the case of Lazarevich, this is the element later used to create a real coat of arms for The Brankovich Dynasty, which has later suffered multiple changes and variations. For this learned assembly it could be interesting to note an interesting appearance that, after the collapse of The Serbian Despotate under the Ottomans (with the fall of their capital Smederevo in 1459), and the refuge of the Ruling Family in Hungary, beside their established coat of arms, appear those with the symbol of the Moldavian bull's head. Such is the case with the seal of Despot Djuradj Brankovich (Saint Maksim, Archbishop of Belgrade /1461-+18. January 1516/) from 1479. Therefore the inconsistency of the main heraldic charges upon the shields of the Brankovichs was no curiosity, as it completely omits the traditional lion of The House. *(pic.13)* The coat of arms of Despot Djuradj Brankovich from 1428. also gives testimony of the said instability of the heraldic charges used in their shields, while their crests still employ the same and inherited heraldic repertoire, which can be a sign of the old belief of the greater importance of the crest comparing to the shield. Namely, even though, the members of the Brankovich Dynasty have rather consistently used their traditional lion and bull's horns (as successors and relatives of the Hrebeljanovich-Lazarevich Dynasty), on the shield of this coat of arms we can see a bend between two fleur-de-lys. *(pic.14)* The shield is literally copied from the coat of arms of Despot Stefan Lazarevich, found on the seal of his Grant to the Miliesheva Monastery. On this seal, the shield is also characteristically reversed. For the motive of the fleur-de-lys (even though it was rather common in earlier Serbian heraldic tradition) in this coat of arms it is believed to be a symbolic mark of their vassal relationship with the King of Hungary.

A nice example of heraldic display from the Serbian Middle Ages is, also, the seal of King Vukashin Mrnjavchevich (from 1370). It also uses a helm with a more elaborate crest of a crowned female head. *(pic.15)* This has also had subsequent repercussions on the arms attributed to this House in the "Ilyrian" heraldic tradition. All the Medieval Serbian armorial bearings were commonly used and known and therefore have served as one of the main sources and basis for the formation of the well known "Ilyrian" Armorial (XIV-XIX century) and their rich tradition which has had an enormous impact on Serbian heraldry to this day.

It is worth mentioning that the characteristic of Serbian Medieval crests was that they mainly didn't use a wreath between a helm and the actual charge in the crest. Its role was more often taken by a cushion, a heraldic

device with the same function of attaching the crest to the helmet.

Crests themselves were mostly in the form of gilded peacock plumes, leather plate-fans, bulls horns, rosettes of gilded tin and other heraldic figures.



However, it would be completely wrong to draw a conclusion that the heraldic tradition of the continental Serbian Medieval State in the XIV century had no use of proper coats of arms, because there are just enough and sufficient archeological and other findings, like seals, rings, coins etc, that give testimony of the opposite. This trend of the shaping of heraldic bearings, which would include the shield too, was especially vivid and active from the beginning of the XV century until the final falling under the Ottoman yoke.

The characteristics of that gradual and more frequent inclusion of the shield in to the heraldic devices of the Serbian aristocracy of that time, in the mainland part of the Serbian Medieval State, is that the shield has remained subdued and inferior comparing to the helm with a crest. This relation is visible in the fact that the shields were often unproportionally small comparing to the helm and crest. Beside that, it wasn't uncommon that the contence of the shield (it's charges) were changed and replaced with others even during the lifetime of the original armiger. On the other

hand, the symbols in the crest were inherited and passed to future generations with much more consistency. All this goes to say that, according to the understanding of the time, the shield was a heraldic element of secondary importance comparing to the crest. We believe that it's not especially needed to underline, or further explane, what is the proportion of contradiction with the contemporary heraldic tradition in most of the Europe in that period.

However, in a relatively short period of time, the shield has taken it's rightful place in the heraldic bearings of the Serbian Medieval nobility too. *(pic.16)* It has taken on the role that it has played for centuries before with our Medieval armigers in the Serbian Littoral. In that sence we should observe the beforementioned influence of the more developed heraldic practice and tradition of the coastal lands of the Nemanjich State on the continental Serbian heraldry.



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